

NOME AS PLACE

By

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## Abstract

Inspired by finding a sense of place within the Circumpolar North this project examines this artist's personal connection to Nome, Alaska with a contemporary photographic approach utilizing the historical Platinum Palladium photographic process. The use of the Platinum Palladium process explores the artist's connection to place, the idea of landscape, cultural iconography, and connects it to historic trends in the field of photography.

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*For Ben and Amos*



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## Introduction

The body of work included in my MFA exhibition titled *Nome as Place* is inspired by my experiences in Nome, Alaska and the Circumpolar North. This work was done over the course of nearly five years of photographing in and around Nome. It consists of a contemporary approach to the historic platinum/palladium photographic process. My work begins with a digital photograph and the final output is a handmade photographic print. With this body of work, I examine the idea of place—literal, figurative, and existential. I look at my connection with Nome in relation to the specific topographic and spatial landscapes found there. My work captures intimate moments of stillness, introspection, new experiences, and ultimately a sense of identity through these collective moments.

Drawing from my absence and presence, this dualism—I am neither here nor there—I attempt to define my personal relationship with this specific place. I explore the elements of landscape and cultural iconography through the connection these ideas have with historic trends in the field of photography. I chose the platinum/palladium process as it provides the handmade photographic print with warmth and subtlety of tone well suited to the Seward Peninsula. The warmth of the print is reflective of the warmth extended to me by the community as well as the bounty the land and sea provides. The marks of my hand on these prints mirror the human presence revealed in the landscape. Through these images of Nome, I explore my coming of age there, and my resolution with grief.

The concept of landscape extends itself into the varied relationships I have established—romantic, platonic, familial and professional. While Nome is not originally

my home, it is a place I now call home, where I feel most at ease. However, as I do not live in Nome full-time, mine is an outsider's view; I am within and without. This sentiment has permeated much of my life experience up to this point. Thus, I seek perspectives that reveal the duality of communal and personal identity.

This series of photographs explore memory and my personal response to land. Photographic theorist and historian Liz Wells states, "Photographs appear as images removed from the flow of time."<sup>1</sup> This is in response to the notion that photographs are memories. Memory is a function of being human. Thus when interpreting photographic imagery, we distill individual experience; "the image is a statement of what *was seen*."<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Roland Barthes states, "what I see...has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred."<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes' notion of the *punctum* this 'pricking' elicits the attention of the viewer initially and later draws from memory--through the narrative, aid-memoires, etc. Barthes defines the *punctum* as the essence of photography. My series began as documenting moments of a summer spent in Nome, and has since evolved into a visual narrative indicative of the transformative power of finding a place in a community, of being still with the land and lastly coming to terms with death.

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<sup>1</sup> Liz Wells, *Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

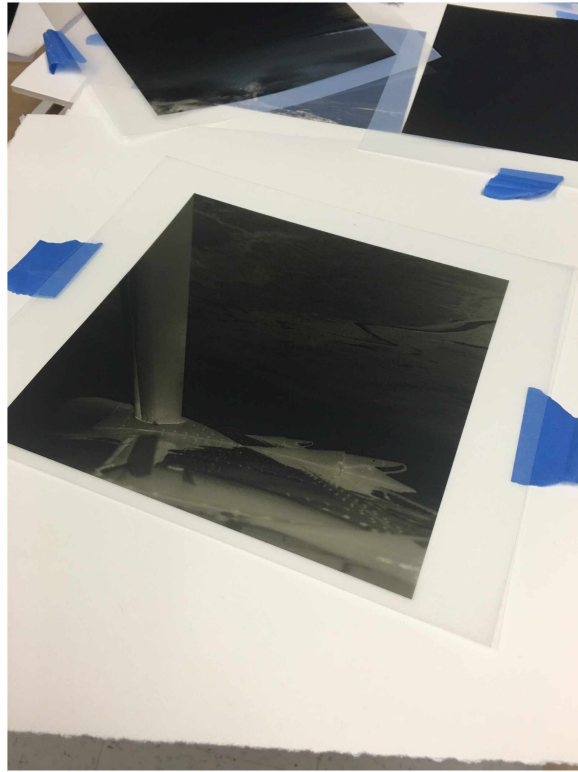
<sup>3</sup> Michael Fried, "Barthes's *Punctum*," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 3 (2005): 539.

Each photo is a testament to the punctum, that which stirred me and serves to reveal the ephemerality of place. I specifically chose to work with the platinum/palladium process for this reason as platinum/palladium prints are known for their permanence, thus juxtaposing the transitory relationship I have with Nome and the permanence of the final print. I place equal emphasis on image and object—the conceptuality of the work and the print itself.

### **Process**

Photographs exist as both image and object, throughout the history of photography as a medium equal emphasis has been placed on both. I am deeply interested in this duality. There has been a resurgence of non-silver photographic processes that to me correlates with the prevalence of web-based digital photographic content. I feel it is still necessary to produce photographic prints, for exhibition and collection. I also value the ease of use a digital camera provides and the option to take a digital photograph and create an infinitely reproducible negative for a process that produces one of a kind final prints like the platinum/palladium process (fig. 1).

My process begins with the initial digital photograph being captured with my digital single-reflex camera (dSLR). A dSLR utilizes a digital imaging sensor as opposed to photographic film. Single lens reflex refers to the mechanism of a mirror within the camera moving to allow for light traveling through the lens to strike the digital sensor and thus capturing the image. DSLRs allow for the use of interchangeable lenses. Early in this project I shot with one lens, a wide angle that allowed for shooting in low light settings though this choice provided softer images. Later I began shooting with a lens



**Figure 1: Digital Negative**

that provides a natural perspective to images. The image is not square initially; this is a choice I make in post-production though I am conscious of this while photographing in the field. I frame my subject with the square in mind. The choice to crop to square happened organically. After sifting through hundreds of my images I found my strongest images were suited to this 1:1 ratio. The 1:1 ratio is usually associated with the medium format film camera. The tension of the square format forces the viewer to really look at the imagery. I am also forced to think about the subject acutely as I am composing.

After post-production editing, I format the image for output and begin the process of making a digital negative. The negative making process is similar to developing film, 'developing' the proper density for the photographic process output is essential. After an

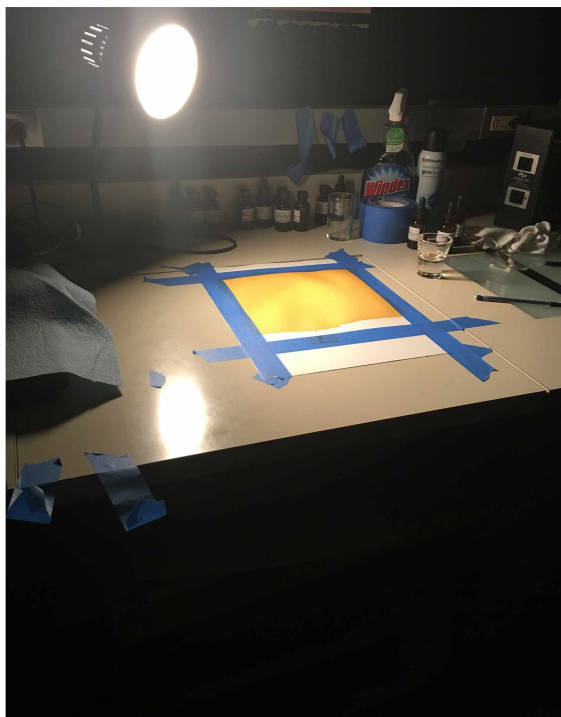
image curve is developed it is ready to be printed on inkjet transparency material. This involves using a program called Quad Tone RIP which allows me to control the amount of ink the printer lays on the inkjet transparency and thus the digital negative is 'developed.' The use of the digital negative is specific to contact printing in that the size of the negative equates the size of output image. The use of both contemporary technologies and historic photographic processes is a nod to the timelessness Nome evokes; yet the mark of modern life is prevalent from the wind farm, to the skeletal remains of the now defunct Distinct Early Warning Line or DEW line system of radar stations established in the mid-1950's in the northern Arctic including a site on Anvil Mountain, to the weather station along Beam Road. I hope to mimic these marks of modernity on the land with my own marks on each photographic print.

After the digital negative is produced, measured and hand cut sheets of Arches Platine paper has to be humidified, as the platinum/palladium process requires humidity of at least 50% to provide consistent results. This poses a great challenge in Fairbanks as the average humidity is less than 50%. I created a humidor of sorts to produce a consistent humidity while printing, using a plastic painting drop cloth and two humidifiers. After humidifying the Arches Platine paper, a solution of platinum, palladium and ferric oxalate are mixed to a specific ratio and hand coated on the paper with a two-inch sable brush (fig. 2).

When I first began coating paper I did not mask my edges and it made for inconsistent print sizes and coating issues (fig. 3). Later I found using blue painters tape helped with maintaining a relatively similar print size. The platinum/palladium process is based on the sensitivity of iron salts (ferric oxalate). As with all nineteenth century



**Figure 2: Arches Platine in full size sheets before being cut**



**Figure 3: Coated Arches Platine paper under subdued tungsten light**

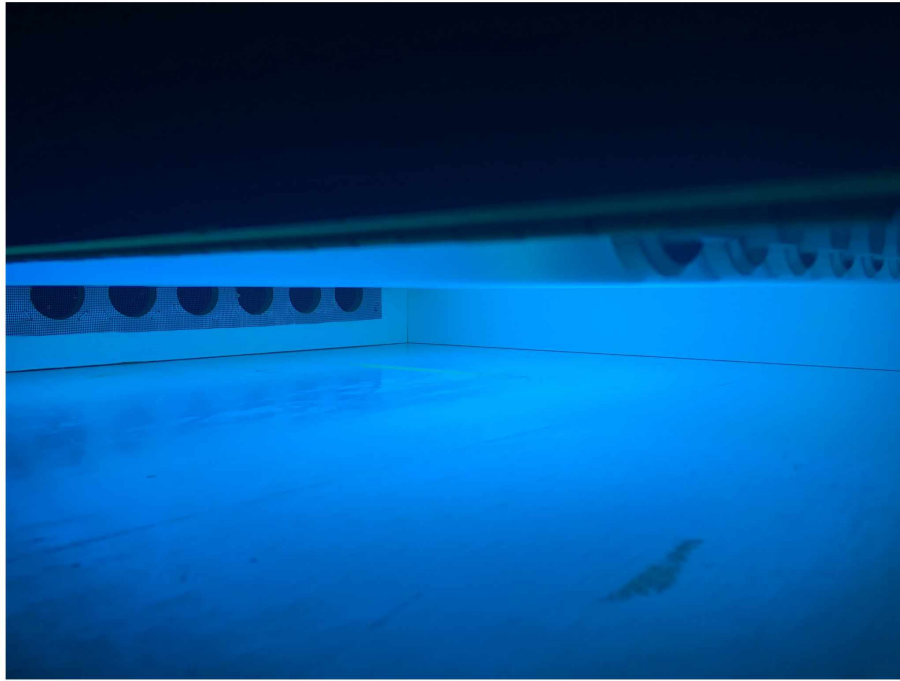
techniques the platinum palladium process is sensitive to UV light. After the digital negative is placed on the coated paper it is exposed to UV in a special box for a determinate amount of time, this time is established per the substrate and density of the negative. Most of the prints in this project were exposed for about seven minutes.

Upon exposure the print is developed (fig. 6) in a bath of potassium oxalate for about one minute, a clearing bath of running water for about ten minutes, another clearing bath of four percent citric acid for ten minutes, two more baths of clearing wash for another ten minutes each and lastly a water bath for upwards of an hour. The print is then placed on a drying screen overnight.



**Figure 4: Two clearing baths**

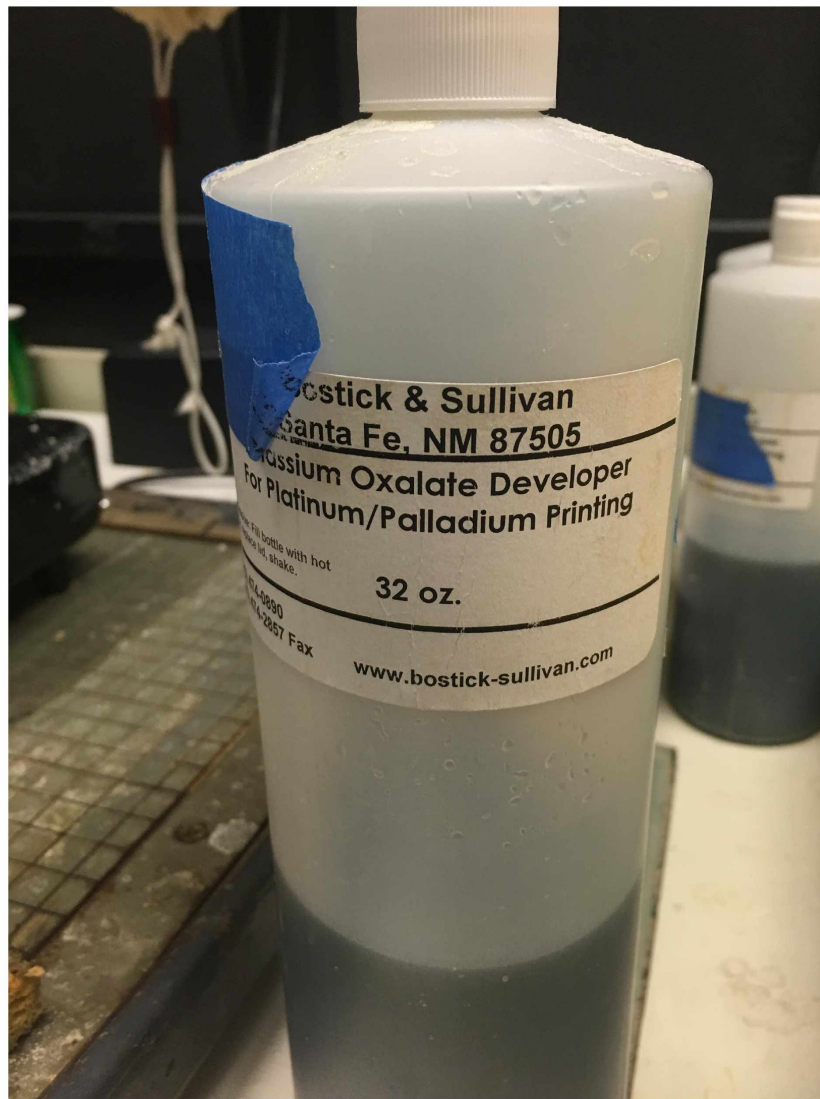




**Figure 4: UV light box**

The aesthetic qualities of the print are tethered to the imaging technologies and materials that it was made with. Before I chose platinum palladium I had considered inkjet printing as the final output for this exhibition but I was not satisfied with this option. I wanted to explore the concept of imagery as memory but also of the print as an object. I wanted to leave behind something that would perhaps become an artifact, ephemera much like the early photographs of Nome I have looked through at the Carrie McLain Museum in Nome.

When considering platinum palladium prints the finished hand-coated print consists of pure platinum palladium metal placed upon and soaked within the paper. The print color can range from neutral gray to sepia. I am drawn to warmer tones and



**Figure 6: Developer**

many of the prints presented are closer to sepia than gray. The warmth of tonality evokes a sense of memory; the softness of the matte finish platinum palladium provides serves to resonate the ethereal quality of recollecting memories some softer than others. (fig. 7)



**Figure 7: *White Alice DEW Lines*, Photographed 2014, Printed 2016  
Platinum Palladium Print**

## Influences

My interest in the arts and photography began early in life. In 2004, a trip to *Photo LA*-- the annual international Los Angeles Photographic Art Exposition introduced me the world of fine art photography and I was instantly enamored. There wasn't a particular photograph that struck me as poignant but the experience as a seventeen-year-old was formative and led me to enroll in a black and white photography course at Bakersfield College. Later I applied and was accepted to Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, California and other art colleges. I initially intended on attending Brooks Institute but found the cost of attendance prohibitive. Later I was accepted at Academy of Art University in San Francisco where I earned a BFA in Fine Art Photography in 2013 (completed after moving to Alaska).

In 2012 a very close friend of mine passed away suddenly. I was left reeling in grief for months. My introduction to Alaska came the summer of 2012. The option of working in Nome, Alaska for the summer was presented to me by Nome local and friend named Isaac Thompson. I accepted the invitation, as I was eager to escape. Curiosity and a need to withdraw from the pressures of city living led to this life-altering decision. I gained employment as a laborer in Nome, Alaska and later that summer traveled to the villages of Teller, Wales, and Diomed, these trips solidified my decision to move to Alaska permanently (fig. 8). I photographed my experiences extensively with a digital camera as I was introduced to a new world of possibilities and new found skills.

I experienced the fruit of my labor through the sweat of my brow. I worked hard, and the Earth provided bounty as if to say 'well done.' The promise of Alaska, of experience and consequently new relationships consumed this period of my life. I saw

Alaska with the fresh eyes of a visitor yet I felt like I knew the land—a homecoming. My early photographs of Nome are indicative of this (fig. 8).



**Figure 8:** *Wales*, 2013

The fauna and flora of this new landscape filled me with awe (fig. 10). I became interested in subsistence after helping set a net in the Bering Sea, the marked connection with land/sea in harvesting/taking only what you need. This was my first introduction to the cultural importance of the use of wild resources in rural Alaska. I sought refuge



**Figure 9: *Crooked Fence*, 2012**



in the stillness of the late summer fog that lingers above the tundra, I counted the number of fish as I watched their silver skin bounce against an aluminum boat. It poured rain for nearly three weeks straight and with the scent of campfire in my hair I found happiness in life's simple pleasures.



**Figure 10: *Musk ox near Anvil Mountain, 2013***

Jay Prosser states in his introduction to *Light in the Dark Room*, "Photographs contain a realization of loss in the fundamental sense that every photograph represents

a real past moment that actually happened and is no longer.”<sup>4</sup> Personal loss has influenced my work immensely. My early childhood was rife with sudden deaths and painful goodbyes this continued into adulthood. In early 2013, I produced a series of photographs that focused on grief. This was in response to the sudden and traumatic death of another close friend (fig.11). I began exploring materials, historical and alternative photographic processes. This was a turning point in my art making process. I sought out artists and writers who drew from grief, explored death and challenged the idea of memory. These artists include Sally Mann, Diana Bloomfield and Todd Hido. Sally Mann ponders on death and self with the question that remains “Where does the self actually go? All the accumulation of memory—the mist rising from the river...when someone dies where does it all go?”<sup>5</sup> For me it’s in these photographs, it’s in those lives I have touched; it is in the taking time to just be.

Photographer Sally Mann has influenced my growth as an artist and photographer; her raw, unapologetic approach to art making is also very cerebral. Sally’s work is alluring -- visceral, intelligent, and informed imagery draws the viewer in. The moodiness of the work is palpable. Mann works in series over a span of time much like my own approach. Through photographing across the seasons over the course of five years, my recent work embodies my relationship with the place, the landscape, and the community. I pre-visualized much of this project taking into consideration the time of day I photographed as well as time of the year as to best use the quality of light to

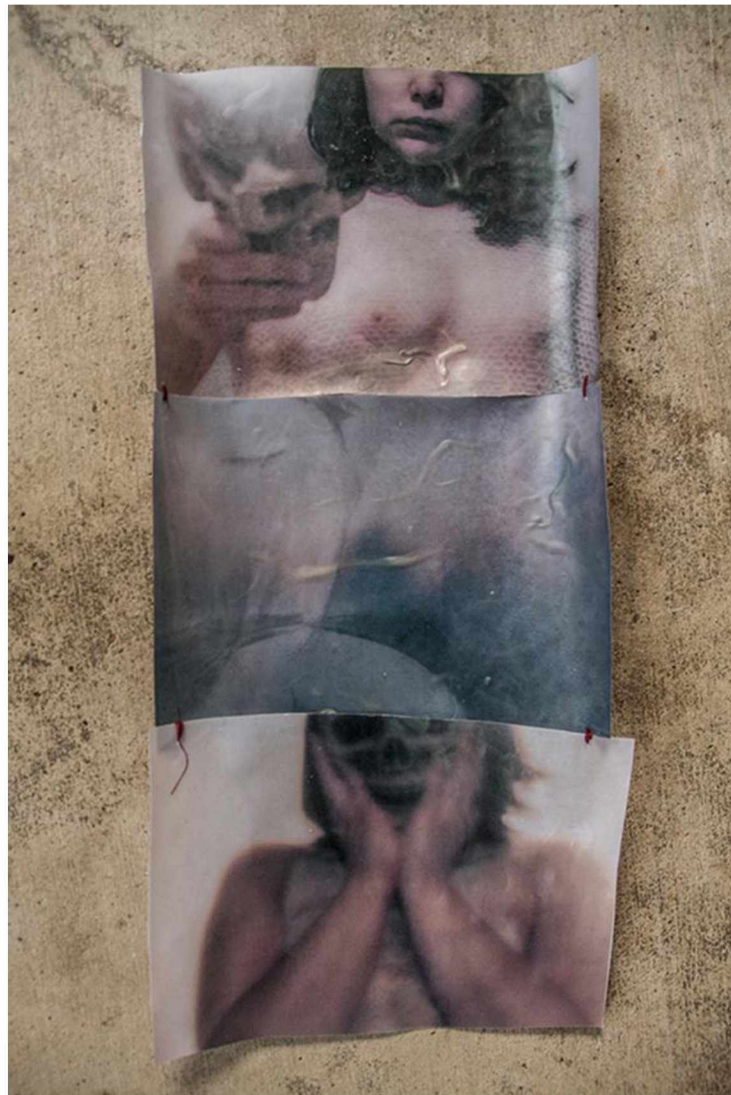
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<sup>4</sup> Jay Prosser, *Light in the Darkroom: Photography and Loss* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2005), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Sally Mann, *Hold Still* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015), 429.



convey a narrative. An intimate look at the lifestyle unique to the Circumpolar North, unique to Alaska, and to Nome, that is realized through the platinum palladium photographic process. This process evokes a sense of timelessness and continuity that is not only apparent in the imagery exhibited but the tonal range of the print and warmth platinum palladium provides.



**Figure 11: *Coming to terms with Death*, Inkjet, Encaustic, Hand Sewn, 2012**

The mark of the artist's hand is also apparent with this hand coated photographic processes, eliciting an element of uncertainty and serendipity that I find particularly alluring. Landscape, in art and to some extent photographic art, challenges established attitudes and to some extent relies on the viewer's familiarity with particular aesthetic histories, national themes, and local culture. Photographer Sally Mann has been influential in the development of my own personal aesthetic. Mann's work explores her personal landscape, be it the farm she owns, the immediate occupants of her space, and her family. Her work touches on themes of grief, history of place, the role of being a mother as well as an artist. She explores the idea of the landscape as a cultural construct. Sally Mann writes, "my time became ecstatic. A radiance coalesces about the landscape, rich in possibility, supercharged with something electric. Time slows down. Time becomes ecstatic...I broke through into that dimension of revelation and ecstasy that eludes historical time."<sup>65</sup>

There are aesthetic and compositional similarities between Figure 11 and Figure 12, the first similarity is tonal quality, warmer tones allude to the function of memory. Compositionally both works place the subject dead center though Mann's subject is in much closer proximity to the viewer than the farmhouse in my own image (fig.13). While there are fences both present in each photograph though the fence in Figure 13 serves as a barrier between myself and the farm in the distance while the fence in Figure 12

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<sup>65</sup> Sally Mann, *Deep South: Sally Mann* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2005), 49.

serves as a reminder of what is beyond the tree in the foreground. To me this fence is a reminder of the past, as it is present though not fully in focus like the haze of memory. Diana Bloomfield has also been influential in my development as a photographer. She specializes in 19th century processes including platinum palladium. She states, “I view landscapes like people. Both are dynamic and ever-changing, beautiful in their own way, and often impermanent.”<sup>7</sup> I relate to this statement.



**Figure 12: Sally Mann, *#1 Scarred Tree*, 1998**

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<http://www.dhbloomfield.com/landscape/>



Figure 13: From *Memories of Childhood Series*, 2011



Figure 14: Diana Bloomfield, *Bald Head Creek*, n.d.



**Figure 15: From *Memories of Childhood Series*, 2011**

A great deal of my work is about the impermanence of a particular moment or sentiment I cannot hold on to (fig. 14). The heavy use of vignette aesthetically is something I also employ in my work. For me it serves to draw the eye in and provides visual boundaries, both Bloomfield and I use this as a visual tool. The subtle tonality and juxtaposition of warm and cool tones is present in Figure 14 and 15, there is a particular mood the clouds in each photograph provide, atmospheric and dreamlike. Unlike Sally Mann and Diana Bloomfield, Todd Hido does not photograph the Southern landscape of the United States. He is based out of San Francisco where we met in late 2007. He frequented Academy of Art University giving presentations and mentorships. His work



spans the nude figure to landscape, I relate most to his landscape work. His series *Roaming* really struck me.<sup>8</sup>

I was interested in how Hido utilized the windshield of a car to create a particular atmosphere. He states, “Shooting through the window started by accident. It was raining one day...And I stopped at an intersection. All the water rushed off the roof of the car and poured down the windshield, making this wonderfully expressive scene in front of me”<sup>9</sup> (fig. 16). I have felt the same way about shooting through the window, often especially in Alaska with the fluctuation of the weather there are many opportunities to shoot through the window.



**Figure 16: Todd Hido, #3225-7, n.d.**

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<sup>8</sup> [http: \(Todd Hido n.d.\)//www.toddhido.com/landscapes.html](http://www.toddhido.com/landscapes.html)

<sup>9</sup> [http://seesawmagazine.com/roaming\\_pages/roaming\\_interview.html](http://seesawmagazine.com/roaming_pages/roaming_interview.html)



**Figure 17: *Windscreen*, 2011**

In Figure 17, I have photographed a road I traveled often as a child. The day was particularly rainy and I loved the way the raindrops were only just visible and the wiper created a blurred effect as if to mimic my sense of nostalgia. There is a particular atmospheric aesthetic that both Hido and myself elicit, though it does not differ from the work of Sally Mann and Diana Bloomfield these artists have influenced my work not only aesthetically but conceptually. The concept of creating meaningful work that draws from the past and is referential to some significant place or moment, the fleeting moment I feel connects my work to those who have influenced me.

## **The Photographs**

My introduction to Alaska included only Nome, villages along the Bering Sea and the Anchorage airport. I moved to Fairbanks the fall of 2012 with 12 boxes— my life. In 2014, I joined the MFA program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. My primary inspiration remained in Nome. I traveled frequently throughout the year between Nome and Fairbanks. I spent summers and breaks there. I found myself connecting deeply with the place.

In the summer of 2014, this bond to place and community was challenged. My partner's younger brother shot himself at the family home in Nome. I was once again pained and felt the call to help. I couldn't bear to see those I loved in such a state of grief. I took to my camera to help me work through the loss. Both my partner, Isaac Thompson and I went on short excursions to places that were familiar to him. I saw this brought him comfort and in a small way it brought me peace as well. He stood against a looming horizon as if the sky mirrored our own heavy hearts and minds. This figure — standing at a distance—realized this distance is important. I was grieving for the loss of Isaac's younger brother but I could not begin to understand the gravity of the loss to Isaac. The mountains just beyond the figure are brooding and personally meaningful to Isaac.

The photo, while striking and moody, is full of personal symbolism. Though I know it will not be conveyed to the viewer, my hope was to create meaningful vignettes that move the viewer through a sense of familiarity or query. I did not intend initially to explore my relationship to my former partner's family and the history they have shared



with me. But this has weaved itself into the fabric of my project. I would not know Nome so intimately had I not been welcomed by these people.



**Figure 18: *Isaac Near Mosquito Pass*, Photographed 2014, Printed 2016  
Platinum Palladium Print**



**Figure 19: *Roger near Newton*, Photographed 2012, Printed 2016  
Platinum Palladium Print**

The few figures that are apparent in my work are of Isaac and his father Roger though they are unidentifiable. I purposefully photograph them from behind or in a way that obscures their identifiable features. I was interested in the figural man; the idea of man interjecting himself on the land and bearing witness simply by being. The same way I bear witness with my camera. I ensure there are processing marks evident on the

final print; this is to mark my emotional and physical presence in this process. While this work touches on the relationships I have developed in Nome, I hope the work resonates and evokes a particular mood— of decay, stillness, and familiarity. I feel these works elicit a timelessness despite references to specific temporality (figs. 20 and 21).

In Figure 20, the wind turbines serve to make a statement about the mark on the landscape left by man. Also it is a reference to reliance on natural resources. Figure 21 is a weather station locally known as ‘The Golf Ball,’ I pass this nearly every day while I am in Nome. I was interested in photographing it in a way that took it out of the context of the landscape. I park near this golf ball to take phone calls as it also marks the area just outside town where there is still cellular service. I spent a great deal of time crying in my car near the golf ball the summer of 2014, if I needed time away from the Thompson’s home. On a lighter note, the golf ball is a nod to those who live just beyond city limits. The ambiguity of the object and lack of reference to scale make this imagery intriguing. There are scratches on the ‘golf ball’ from strong winds and storms endured, scars of time. I am interested in the beauty and impermanence of landscape and how land becomes “place” because someone has been there. This transience—the *mono no aware*—carries a quiet sadness. In Japanese aesthetics the term *mono no aware* translates to the pathos of things, though this meaning is complex and has changed over time. I relate to this pathos. Despite the marked grief I have faced as reflected in the marks of trauma in Figure 21, and the need to come to terms and accept loss as an inevitable part of being, I can still find enjoyment in life. There is hope and light even when faced with darkness and deep pain.



**Figure 20: *Wind Farm*, Photographed 2013, Printed 2016  
Platinum Palladium Print**



**Figure 21: *The Golf Ball*, Photographed 2016, Printed 2016  
Platinum Palladium Print**

## **Conclusion**

In summary, I postulate the idea that landscape and my bearing witness to the land serves to define place, and ultimately identity. My quest is to understand who I am in relation to the world around me through introspection, exploration and inquisition. Though my life up to this point has been transitory, I find a sense of place and the welcome feeling of home when I am in Nome. There's something to be said of community and sharing the experience of living in bush Alaska, of subsisting off the land, respecting the past while living in the present moment though as Barthes states, the present is already deferred. I bear witness to this deferment with my camera with the images I produce and the prints that I hope will become a testament to having found my place in Nome.

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